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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001726

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/17/2014

TAGS: PTER PGOV CE LTTE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: EXAGGERATED PRESS REPORTS OF LTTE

BREAKTHROUGH ON TALKS

REF: A. COLOMBO 1705

B. COLOMBO 1563

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Weekend press reports in both the government-owned and independent media trumpeting a breakthrough in stalled negotiations between the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) appear to have been overblown. According to sources in both the Peace Secretariat and the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance, the LTTE has not wavered from its long-held position that its proposal for an interim administration must form the basis of resumed negotiations. The hyperbolic reports may be due in part to wishful thinking that the tough new line that the Tigers are apparently hearing during their ongoing meetings in Europe (Ref A) may convince them to adopt a more accommodating stance on negotiations. End summary.

¶2. (U) Over the past two days independent and state-owned media in English, Sinhala and Tamil have been reporting that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) have adopted a newly flexible position on resuming negotiations with the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL). Claiming that the LTTE is now willing to discuss GSL counterproposals to the Tigers' own proposal for an interim administration, many reports predicted an imminent return to negotiations. "Deadlock broken: LTTE ready for talks with Government," crowed the independent Daily Mirror on October 16. "Permanent peace on the horizon," proclaimed the state-owned Daily News October 18. Similar stories appeared in the Sinhala and Tamil vernacular press, with the notable exception of the pro-LTTE Sudar Oli. (Note: On October 18 the BBC Sinhala service reported that LTTE political wing leader Tamilselvan, currently leading a Tiger delegation to several European capitals, had refuted the Sri Lankan press reports to the BBC Sinhala language program the previous day. End note.)

¶3. (C) According to sources in both the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) and the Peace Secretariat, however, the media's optimism is misplaced. Ambassador Jayantha Dhanapala, Director General of the Peace Secretariat, told the Ambassador on October 18 that he is unsure what prompted "the sunshine stories" over the weekend. Noting that the LTTE has always understood that the GSL would present counterproposals to the Tigers' controversial Interim Self-Governing Authority (ISGA) proposal, he described press coverage of the LTTE position as "nothing new." It is difficult to assess the purported statement by Tiger spokesman "Daya Master" to AP indicating a new Tiger position, Dhanapala said, since it is never clear who in the Tiger hierarchy, short of supremo Prabhakaran himself, speaks with authority. That said, Dhanapala expressed hope that the tough line the Tiger delegation is reportedly hearing during its European trip (Ref A) will help moderate its uncompromising stance on restarting talks.

¶4. (C) Dhanapala could not identify any recent event that might have prompted the rosy news coverage. Even the October 16 release of two Sinhalese home guards, abducted by the LTTE in August in Trincomalee (Ref B), was no reason for optimism, Dhanapala indicated, since the GSL had to release ten LTTE prisoners to secure their release. While stressing that he did not believe, as a matter of principle, in exchanging detained terrorists for hostages, the situation in Trincomalee--which was volatile to begin with--had grown so tense and politically charged because of the abductions as to be untenable, he commented.

¶5. (C) TNA MP G.G. Ponnambalam also discounted press reports of an LTTE change of heart. As of October 16, when Ponnambalam claims to have spoken to the delegation in Europe, he detected no evidence of a changed position. Echoing Dhanapala's comments, Ponnambalam noted that the LTTE had never refused to consider GSL counterproposals, as long as those counterproposals do not form the basis for negotiations. He described the TNA's unprecedented meeting on October 11 with the Malwatte Mahanayake, the Buddhist religious leader, as "very positive and encouraging." (Note: Sinhalese nationalist groups protested outside the monk's residence while the meeting took place. End note.) According to Ponnambalam, the Buddhist cleric had told the TNA delegation that despite his personal disagreement with

the ISGA, he realized that the Tiger proposal "must be negotiated"--a significant departure from the public stand adopted by other leading members of the Buddhist clergy.

¶6. (C) Comment: Like the press reports of one week earlier claiming that another rift in the Tiger leadership had occurred, these latest reports of an imminent LTTE change of heart are too good to be true. That said, the Tigers' less than cordial reception in stops along their European tour may be forcing them to rethink their rigid stance on resuming negotiations. Well-timed statements by "Daya Master" and others in the Tigers' second-tier leadership may be intended to make the Tigers sound more reasonable and seem more internationally presentable while they are pitching their case in Europe. The real test, as always, is how the Tigers behave on the ground. For now, unfortunately, we see little evidence of change.

LUNSTEAD